

# American Landpower and the Middle East of 2030

MICHAEL R. EASTMAN

## *The Proverbial Debate*

As our current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, political deliberations in this country return to a familiar pattern. Intent on “not re-fighting the last war,” a debate about future military strategy dominates the discussion. As in the past, the debate is sharpened by a budget ax suspended over the Department of Defense. The services anticipate funding cuts so deep as to allow for only one strategic approach to survival. And, as in the past, many approach the problem as bureaucrats defending turf, rather than as strategists objectively creating a military that will best serve the nation.

These discussions risk overshadowing some of the most fundamental considerations necessary for developing a sound strategy—which threats will our nation most likely face and what will the military we retain be capable of doing. Even in a fiscal environment that foreshadows major reductions, elements of sound strategic planning remain invaluable. As military professionals, we need to examine threats to our national interests, current and future, and offer our best advice as to how these challenges should be addressed. If nothing else, the civilian leadership needs to be advised of those things that can and cannot be accomplished (without great cost or unacceptable risk) as a result of their decisions.

This article frames a response to one future role of American land forces by examining the Middle East over the next twenty years. It begins by highlighting our enduring national interests in the region. It then considers potential threats to these interests, current and future, and attempts to assess their likelihood. Finally, those scenarios that require American ground forces are identified, along with the implications of these decisions. The intent is to provide a strategic perspective in a debate too often clouded by budgetary concerns and unnecessarily framed as an interservice, zero-sum game.

## *The Problem with Predictions*

Any effort to forecast future conflicts is inherently a questionable endeavor.<sup>1</sup> If the past is any indication, the strategist is far more often wrong

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than right on the specifics. The work is doubly in jeopardy when the attempt is tied to a particular service and vulnerable to concerns of parochialism and bureaucratic interests. This article acknowledges these challenges, examining as it does the role of landpower in the Middle East for the next two decades from an Army perspective. This is not an attempt at perfect prediction nor are ground forces offered as the military panacea for all future contests in this region. There are, however, vital national interests at stake in the Middle East for the foreseeable future, and a wide range of threats to these interests.

While informed observers may argue about the probability of one threat or another actually occurring, there is a general consensus regarding America's interests and the potential threats. There is little dispute that demand for petroleum will increase with the industrial expansion of China and India, or that demographic pressures and an overwhelmingly youthful population will increase political pressures on Middle Eastern regimes. The latent questions, then, are which of these threats requires a capability uniquely resident in American ground forces, and what does that mean for the Army in the current fiscal environment?

While it may be impossible to predict with certainty the actions of a potential adversary, the experience of the last several conflicts has shown American ground forces, and the Army in particular, provide the nation with a set of capabilities that simply cannot be achieved solely from the other domains. Whether as a demonstration of American political intent through boots on the ground, a deterrent against the largely land-based forces of this region, a training partnership with current and future allies, or a force seasoned by a decade of war, American ground forces fill a vital and complementary role in the suite of options available to this nation in times of adversity.

While there is bound to be disagreement about the powers of prediction, perfect foresight is not the goal. Instead, we should seek to identify a range of likely challenges the nation may face as a basis for weighing decisions related to capabilities inherent in the future force. Whether or not these specific challenges come to fruition is at least partly impacted by an adversary's calculations regarding America's ability to prevent or counter them.

### ***The United States' Vital Interests in the Middle East***

The 2010 National Security Strategy identifies four enduring national interests:

- The security of the United States, its citizens, and US allies and partners.
- A strong, innovative, and growing US economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity.
- Respect for universal values at home and around the world.
- An international order advanced by US leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.<sup>2</sup>

When the overarching goals of national security, prosperity, values, and international order are considered in the context of the Middle East, three vital interests emerge that will remain relevant decades into the future.

Any discussion of US strategic interests in the Middle East begins with ensuring global access to oil. In the *2011 World Energy Outlook*, the International Energy Agency projects the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) will supply nearly half of all global demand by 2030, up from 42 percent today.<sup>3</sup> Much of the growth in demand will come from the developing economies of China and India.<sup>4</sup> Despite domestic actions taken over the next few decades to reduce American reliance on foreign oil, the majority of our trading partners will remain dependent on a commodity concentrated in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

These projections make stability and security in the region a precondition for the successful functioning of international markets. Even the perception of a disruption to the flow of oil will have global consequences, damaging international economies and directly impacting the prosperity of America and its allies. As such, it remains in our national interest to ensure stability across this region, not only because the United States requires OPEC oil, but also because the global free market system depends on access to this crucial commodity.

A second vital national interest in the Middle East is the disruption, dismantling, and defeat of those extremist networks that have the intent and capability to threaten the United States or its allies. Many terrorist organizations trace their origins to this region, where they have taken full advantage of popular dissatisfaction, dysfunctional governments, and ungoverned territories to create bases of operation, recruitment, and training. The radical Islamist component of these groups is intrinsic to their appeal, making their continued presence in the Middle East a reasonable assumption for future years.

A third related interest is denying terrorist organizations and their proxies access to weapons of mass destruction. Possession of nuclear, biological, chemical, or radiological weapons would enable these groups to perpetuate violence on a spectacular scale. Controlling the spread of these weapons, along with the knowledge required to produce them, remains a vital national interest. For this reason, continued efforts to limit the proliferation of these weapons to regimes opposed to the United States, such as Iran, remain a strategic objective.

There are unquestionably additional interests for the United States in the Middle East. For example, the spread of democratic values and respect for basic human rights, the continued participation of Turkey as a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partner, and defense of Israel as a democratic ally in the region. While important, these impact the development and execution of military strategy only in the sense that they are components of vital interests already discussed.

This fact remains true for two fundamental reasons. First, many of the specific regional interests of the United States have a temporal component that makes their utility in the development of future strategy problematic. Second, while the defense of universal human rights and the promotion of democracy

have long been at the heart of America's national interests, the military is less effective in achieving these interests than are a number of the other components of national power. Although partnership with regional militaries or the potential isolation of adversaries certainly contribute to our moral and ideological objectives, they primarily do so through preventive actions aimed at ensuring stability.

### ***The Middle East of 2030 and Beyond***

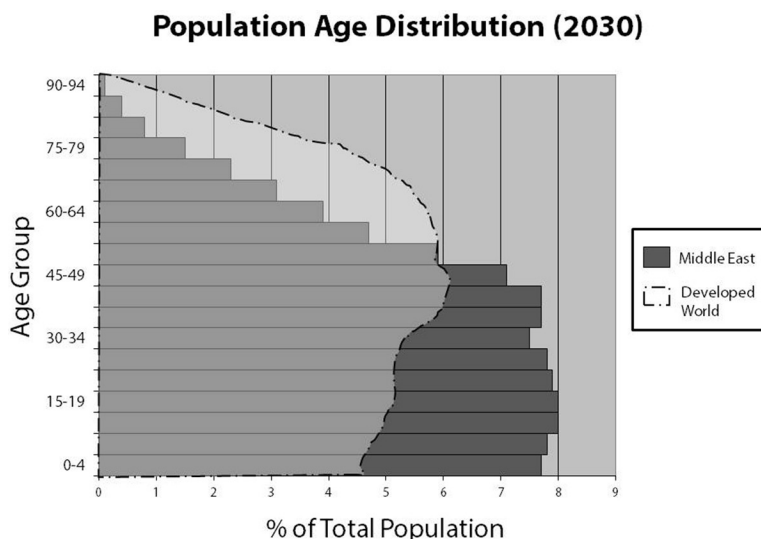
It is extremely difficult to forecast the future trajectory of events in this region. Lacking perfect foresight, the strategist can only survey what is known of events and actors and make probabilistic assessments of how things will evolve. To be certain, short of assuming an outbreak of stability in the Middle East (which seems wildly irresponsible as a matter of policy regardless of how desirable this may be), one needs to examine current trends and potential threats impacting vital national interests.

First among these is the continued importance of petroleum to the global market. More than half of the world's oil supply will reside in this region, with Iraq's production increasing to meet and perhaps even exceed all other nations except Saudi Arabia. At the same time, countries not currently endowed with an abundance of petroleum are unlikely to discover it. Given the ever-increasing importance of oil over the next several decades, this shortage of such a critical resource has numerous consequences.

Middle Eastern countries whose economies rely almost exclusively on energy exports for revenue will have little incentive to diversify. Patronage and the redistribution of oil revenues, whether in the form of social welfare or government patronage, will remain the dominant practice.<sup>6</sup> Development of a viable middle class will be retarded, and the wealth gap between social strata will persist fostering popular dissatisfaction. A secondary result of the reliance on oil exports will be the growing inability of OPEC members to manipulate production for political gain. Relying on petroleum revenues to secure governmental power while having to financially placate a disenfranchised population, political leaders will be unable to accept large fluctuations in production. Consequently, these pressures make threats to close the Straits of Hormuz ring hollow, as such an option would be the equivalent of political suicide for regional powers. Any short-term damage to the global market would be more than offset by domestic unrest in the initiating countries, and in all probability meet with incredible resistance from OPEC members whose own survival relies on the flow of this commodity.

The rise in prices that always accompanies growing demand will also have a dramatic impact on the poorer countries in the region. As their neighbors become wealthier, the lack of comparable markets, a commercial middle class, and modern transportation infrastructure will leave many nations even further behind. The resulting popular dissatisfaction will be exacerbated by other regional trends that threaten to destabilize the entire region.

Demographic projections indicate that by 2030 more than half the population of the Middle East will be under the age of 34, a figure exceeding that of the developed world (see Figure 1).<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1.** 2030 Aggregate Population Age Distribution (Middle East and the Developed World). Source: United States Census Bureau International Population Database, 2012.

This “youth bulge” promises to challenge even the most efficient of governments as demands for education, social services, and upward mobility are met with limited opportunities, silence, and repression.<sup>8</sup> Governments that rely heavily on oil revenue redistribution will be hard pressed to meet the needs of an increasingly interconnected society that is only too aware of standards of living in other parts of the world. Those that favor a more radical interpretation of Islam are likely to focus their dissatisfaction on external forces, blaming Western society as the source of all their problems. With few prospects for positive improvement in their social status, we are almost certain to witness the continued emigration of intellectual capital. Those unable to flee will provide a reservoir of potential recruits attracted to the message of radical Islam and eager to vent their frustration.

The evolution of popular uprisings throughout the region represents a third general trend impacting the Middle East for the next several decades. As recent events have demonstrated, predictions of a regional shift toward forms of democratic institutions are premature at best. There is undoubtedly some level of commonality with recent protest movements against ineffective or repressive government. The manner in which affected regimes have responded, however, along with internal divisions within protest groups, make a result favoring Western democracies unlikely.

The instability associated with nations attempting to transition between various forms of government is one of the most pressing factors in identifying future threats. Multiple studies have demonstrated that transitioning to a democratic form of government, even if loosely defined as achieving stable representative government, is a process often requiring 20 to 30 years. More troubling, states undergoing either a transition to democracy or backsliding toward greater autocracy are far more likely to go to war than those with a stable government.<sup>9</sup>

Which Middle Eastern countries ultimately adopt a representative form of government is, therefore, less important than the instability that accompanies these transitions. With numerous nations in the early stages of transition, the likelihood of conflict has to be considered quite high in the coming decades. While there is evidence some of these states may eventually succeed in their quest for representative government, it does not necessarily bode well for regional stability in the interim. There is also a high probability that even a representative government in a nation such as Egypt or Syria will retain an anti-Western orientation in keeping with the prevailing popular views of its citizens.<sup>10</sup>

A nuclear Iran represents the fourth major variable impacting American national interests in the region. Despite a continuing effort to undermine Iran's nuclear program, it is quite probable they will develop a number of low-yield weapons within the next decade. This reality poses at least two distinct challenges for America and other Western democracies.<sup>11</sup> Emboldened by the possession of a nuclear weapon, Iran will feel secure from invasion. The regime will be increasingly prone to exert pressures on neighboring states as it attempts to expand authority over the Shia populace in the region. While it is unlikely that Iran will conduct any cross-border invasions or engage in overt interstate war, it will still experience many of the same pressures of demographics and economic unrest as the remainder of the region. Unable to meet the demands of a restive populace, the Iranian regime will likely focus attention outward to distract citizens from problems at home. Operating under the belief that nuclear weapons prohibitively raise the stakes for any intervention, the Iranians will remain a persistent force for instability across the region.

The possibility that Iran might be willing to share nuclear technology with terrorist groups should also enter into any strategic calculations. Although the risks of state-sponsored nuclear terrorism are not lost on the Iranian regime, there are still significant challenges associated with preventing the transfer of weapons and nuclear technology to nonstate actors.<sup>12</sup> Barring massive governmental reform, divisions between the Iranian military and political leadership, along with the opposition to the United States and the West in general, make unsanctioned weapons transfer an ever-present threat.

Finally, given the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran on their doorstep, a number of the more advanced Gulf States should be expected to initiate weapons programs of their own. The dynamics of such arms races are only too well known, as is their tendency to create instability and miscalculation. The diversion of government funding and focus on weapons programs will

distract regimes from providing for basic societal needs, further exacerbating discontent across the region.

Consideration also needs to be given to how major powers will engage the Middle East in the coming decades. As China and India increase their demand for oil, it is only logical these nations will pursue a more active role in ensuring access to this vital resource.<sup>13</sup> While currently lacking the strategic influence enjoyed by the United States, Chinese military investments are clearly directed at increasing their ability to project power. On the one hand, this increased interest in the region presents an opportunity for burden-sharing, as both China and the United States will benefit from a stable Middle East; however, if American forward presence is significantly reduced, a possibility is created for foreign economic and military interests to fill the void. Should America's future relations with these emerging international powers deteriorate, the result may be the ceding of US influence in the region, actions that could have lasting ramifications.

### ***The Enduring Utility of Landpower***

The potential for instability in the Middle East will only increase over the next several decades. Unlike the ten years that witnessed the massive commitment of American forces in Iraq, future years will be less likely to require a sustained ground campaign. United States vital interests as defined in this article will not lend themselves to interventions for the purposes of promoting regime change or the establishment of democratic institutions; the absence of what some have termed "wars of choice" should not be mistaken for a reduction in the role played by land forces in defense of America's enduring interests in the region. There are significant roles for Army and Marine forces in the Middle East, roles that will remain relevant throughout time as part of our national effort to promote stability and achieve strategic objectives.

First among these is the importance of demonstrating American commitment and resolve. The role of the military in the Middle East cannot be understated. As national institutions, the armed forces of the region hold significant political influence.<sup>14</sup> They serve myriad roles as forces for stability as well as agents of repression, unconstrained by the constitutional limitations that define the role of militaries in Western society. In its attempt to promote stability and prevent conflict, one of the more effective ways America exerts influence is by building partnerships with the armed forces of potential allies. Not only do these relationships open channels of communication and reduce opportunities for miscalculation, but they also tend to have a professionalizing effect on the militaries involved.

The fact that the armed forces of the Middle East are predominantly land-based should also not be discounted when developing military-to-military relations. Statistics show that across the Middle East, ground forces constitute approximately 87 percent of all military forces (see Figure 2).<sup>15</sup>

Country	Total Military	% Ground Forces	% Air Forces	% Naval Forces
Bahrain	8,200	73%	18%	9%
Egypt	704,000	88%	7%	5%
Iran	868,000	94%	2%	4%
Iraq	275,200	97%	2%	1%
Israel	621,500	83%	14%	3%
Jordan	160,700	92%	7%	0%
Kuwait	39,500	89%	6%	5%
Lebanon	76,400	98%	1%	1%
Oman	34,000	74%	15%	12%
Palestinian Authority	49,000	100%	0%	0%
Qatar	11,800	72%	13%	15%
Saudi Arabia	214,500	84%	9%	6%
Syria	411,500	89%	10%	2%
Turkey	800,000	71%	16%	14%
United Arab Emirates	65,500	90%	7%	3%
Yemen	26,500	98%	1%	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,366,300</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>5%</b>
Source: 2011 INSS Military Forces Database.				

**Figure 2.** Composition of Middle East Militaries.

The United States needs to retain sufficient ground forces to ensure a relevant, productive relationship with these land-force components. A reduced forward presence is certainly a sound policy based on the expected strategic environment; however, America cannot allow this to result in loss of interaction between its military and those of the region. Efforts to improve the effectiveness of regional armed forces also serve as a potential buffer against the hegemonic ambitions demonstrated by Iran. These military-to-military relationships frequently result in partnerships that provide the United States with local intelligence networks that directly impact America's ability to counter terrorists resident in the region.

A component of this counterterrorism mission for Army forces is the targeted disruption of terrorist organizations based throughout the Middle East. Secure, persistent access throughout the region is not guaranteed once American forces complete their withdrawal. Absent continued partnerships and an operational footprint in key states, the complexity of future counterterrorism operations increases dramatically. Without the ability to maintain a forward ground presence, precision strikes remain one of the few options available to national policymakers, but the ability to detain terrorists and leverage any intelligence will be lost without the participation of ground forces. Perhaps even more damaging, the moral legitimacy associated with remote

drone and air strikes has come under ever-increasing criticism throughout the international community.<sup>16</sup> Reliance on cross-border remote strikes, whether from drones or aircraft, will erode support for American goals and ultimately undermine the accomplishment of national objectives.

Major interstate war will arguably be the least likely source of instability in the Middle East in the next few decades. Iran's aspirations for regional leadership, however, along with the demonstrated tendency for regional powers that are suffering political duress to focus on external threats as a means of distracting the populace from the unrest at home make war in the Middle East a real possibility. Along with efforts to partner with regional militaries, the United States needs to retain highly capable and readily deployable ground forces capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating regional aggressors. American dominance of the air and sea is not likely to be challenged for the foreseeable future. As a means of deterring aggression and possible combat between regional militaries, however, relying solely on long-range precision platforms greatly reduces the strategic and operational options available to our national policymakers.

Increasing urbanization with the penchant for warring factions to blend into the civilian population vastly increases the challenges associated with future warfare in this region. There is little doubt American airpower will remain capable of inflicting unacceptable damage and rapidly defeating any invading force. These capabilities and recognized dominance do not necessarily translate into victory against the wide range of military options that are much more likely than armored warfare. Whether the task becomes the separation of belligerents, enforcement of a zone of neutrality, or the defeat of insurgent forces, American military options need to encompass the full range of responses beyond precision strikes. Recent Israeli experiences against Hezbollah and Hamas demonstrated that airpower alone is ineffective against the hybrid forms of warfare that are increasingly commonplace in the Middle East.<sup>17</sup>

Reliance on local forces backed by American airpower, though often advocated as a cost-effective option, also entails specific risks. As demonstrated most recently by operations in Libya, the United States and its allies risk losing the ability to shape the outcome of even a minor conflict without a sufficient and persistent, ground presence. The importance of creating and maintaining stability in the Middle East argues against the employment of American military capability unless accompanied by a capacity to set conditions and manage a positive result.

Finally, the ability to rapidly deploy large numbers of ground forces provides policymakers and strategists with a number of strategic options. As a demonstration of political intent, there are few acts a president can take that demonstrate American resolve more than boots on the ground. The commitment of ground forces capable of operating across the spectrum of combat can in and of itself prevent conflict from escalating without necessitating the destruction of an adversary's military or infrastructure. While some number of these forces can and should be resident in the reserve component, the requirement to rapidly

deploy capable ground forces demands a credible percentage be retained in the active force.

### ***Where Do We Go from Here?***

By all indications, conditions in the Middle East over the next few decades appear bleak. Just as the global economic importance of the region reaches its crest, demographic and political pressures combine to promote instability on a scale not seen in recent history. When this instability is placed in the context of the aspirations associated with a nuclear-armed Iran and the pernicious presence of international terrorist organizations, ensuring stability in the region will require a concerted effort by all agencies of the United States and its allies.

Developing the appropriate military strategy for the Middle East begins with an evaluation of our enduring national interests. Limiting American interests to those that are truly vital results in a relatively short list. The danger lies in incorporating goals that either have proven unachievable or do not directly impact America's security, prosperity, or values. Even when developing a strategy that narrowly defines our vital interests, it is blatantly obvious there are several critical missions that can only be achieved by capable ground forces. With regional stability as the primary strategic objective, the importance of preventive measures cannot be overstated. The United States has already made a major investment in regional stability through its efforts in Iraq. While far from perfect, we should not squander these gains but capitalize on them in the pursuit of lasting stability.

Maintaining and expanding partnerships with regional militaries will strengthen national bonds, increase communication, and minimize the opportunities for strategic miscalculation. At the same time, professionalizing our allies' militaries serves to deter regional actors who may be inclined to influence the local populace. As America's network of forward bases disappears, there is ever-increasing pressure to maintain relationships as a means of gaining access and the intelligence required to counter terrorists operating throughout the region. Finally, it is in America's strategic interest to retain military ties to the Middle East. Accepting a reduced forward presence need not equate to the dissolution of relationships, particularly as other major powers will have increasing incentives to fill the void left by America's withdrawal. With ground forces constituting the overwhelming majority of the military organizations in the Middle East, it is only logical America's Army remains resourced and trained to accomplish US military objectives in this region.

The Army, as part of the joint force, will serve as a credible deterrent to interstate conflicts in the region. America's air and naval forces, by their inherent dominance, make the reemergence of classic conventional warfare extremely unlikely. Their utility against other forms of warfare, however, whether an insurgency or a hybrid threat that operates among an urban population, will be greatly diminished unless accompanied by highly capable ground forces. Because the regional threats detailed earlier in this article make low-level

conflict increasingly likely, it remains in America's interest to retain a force capable of deterring, and, if necessary, defeating any military threat.

As we consider what military forces should be retained to defend US interests in the Middle East, the answer that evolves is neither a pure counter-insurgency force nor one weighted toward stand-off precision fires. Instead, the nation should retain a balanced force capable of operating across the full spectrum of conflict. This in no way undermines the continued prudent investment in air or sea power. An honest assessment of the threats throughout the Middle East and the capabilities required to counter them argues for a significant ground force capability. The global importance of the Middle East through 2030 demands a ground force capable of partnering with and training allies while deterring and defeating any land-based threat.

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